

UK Elections: Britain's Future Will Be Decided in Six Weeks

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In December's UK election, everything will be up for grabs. The Tories are nervous, but Labour has its work cut out for it. Above all, it must shift the focus of debate from the Brexit melodrama to the ravages of austerity.

The UK electorate is off to the polls again, for the fourth general election in a decade. While Parliament wrangles over the exact date, the December election promises a number of firsts: the first December election since 1923, the first winter election since 1974, and the first election not held on a Thursday since 1931.

But it could also be the first election to return a Labour majority since 2005. Polls remain incredibly volatile, and at only ten points ahead, the Conservatives are in a worse position than they were at the start of the 2017 campaign, which saw them lose seats and an overall majority despite beginning twenty-four points ahead of Labour. The hubris Theresa May showed in calling an early election to attempt to increase her majority was rewarded with a bloody nose on election day. Boris Johnson has shown the same hubris, arguing as Theresa May did that he needs a majority to ensure Brexit is delivered.

In the days before the parliamentary votes on an early election, the Tories briefed that they were unequivocally confident, certain of a huge Labour defeat, and of Johnson's personality persuading millions to return to voting Conservative. Now that Labour have backed an election, many Tory MPs are far more nervous, with one claiming it is a "suicide mission." The Conservatives know this is a huge gamble: voters may feel they're being taken for granted and switch parties, but the biggest risk to the Tories is the Brexit Party standing in hundreds of seats, arguing that Johnson has failed to deliver Brexit by the date he was promised, and eating away at the Conservative vote, allowing Labour to take the lead in Tory marginals.

But Labour also have a number of factors in their favor. The party has the biggest tranche of young activists by miles, with the Conservatives failing utterly to restart a youth movement after the party's previous youth wing collapsed due to a horrific bullying scandal. Labour will have far more people delivering leaflets, knocking on doors, and canvassing voters in person and on the phone. Momentum is skilled at delivering large numbers of campaigners to key marginals; it was central to Labour's increased number of elected MPs in 2017.

The impartiality rules that cover broadcasting also affect coverage of the party: policies and platforms get a more equitable hearing in the run up to polling day, and Labour saw a huge increase in poll ratings once these rules were in place in the election two years ago. Far more Labour MPs were given airtime, and talk was focused far more on manifesto policies than infighting in the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Most commentators have argued the election will be fought almost entirely on Brexit: that was also

the claim last time, and the actual election was instead about social and economic policies. Labour did well after their radical manifesto was launched, covering the National Health Service, schools, public services, and the economy. The Conservatives were taken aback by how much harm their care plans — dubbed a “death tax” — did to their polling, and have put far less work into their manifesto than Labour has in the years since the last election. The fact that Johnson has both failed to deliver Brexit so far, and repeatedly insisted he could take the United Kingdom out of the European Union by October 31 will be used against the Tories for the entire campaign, by all parties.

While the Conservatives might have the ear of the majority of the media, Labour have the radical ideas that are actually likely to appeal to voters. After nine years of austerity, the electorate needs to be asked what the last decade has done to their local area, their communities, their standard of living, and their children’s life chances and future. Food banks barely existed in the United Kingdom prior to the Conservatives taking power in 2010; now they feed millions and are completely commonplace. The less well-off have seen their life expectancies fall, while those at the top have seen their earnings rise and taxes fall. Doctors are reporting malnutrition and rickets, illnesses that were seen as Victorian and extinct, but are now returning due to the deliberate impoverishment of the working classes.

The Conservatives may win, but Labour could too: everything is up for grabs. The Tories will try and turn the election into a referendum on Brexit, but the country wants hope for the future, rather than being dragged into parliamentary squabbles by the wealthy landlords and businessmen that populate the Conservative Party. Labour performed far better than expected in 2017 and with hard work and a strong manifesto, it could bury Boris Johnson’s Conservatives in time for Christmas.

Dawn Foster

P.S.

• Jacobin.
10.29.2019 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/10/general-election-labour-party-conservatives-brexit>:

• Dawn Foster is a Jacobin staff writer, a columnist for the Guardian, and the author of Lean Out.